

INSIDE

The NBA

Keeping Pacers

Indiana tries to maintain its nucleus • The Bulls' Clemons in demand • Rodman at his most outrageous

BREAK UP the Pacers

True, Indiana was one win away from the NBA Finals in each of the previous two seasons, but this spring the Hawks, seeded sixth in the Eastern Conference, eliminated the third-seeded Pacers in the first round of the playoffs. In that series Indiana looked lost without All-Star guard Reggie Miller, the team's scoring leader (21.1 average in 1995-96), who did not make an appearance until the deciding Game 5 because of a fractured right eye socket.

Now the franchise finds itself at a crossroads. Miller will become a free agent on July 1. So will frontcourt regulars Antonio Davis and Dale Davis. Unlike Miller, both Davises had mediocre seasons. Team president Donnie Walsh says he's confident he'll re-sign all three players, but even if he does, can the Pacers contend for a championship?

Apparently coach Larry Brown doesn't think so. Sources say Brown, who is prone to doubts about the potential of whatever team he coaches, was so despondent over the Pacers' early exit and lack of consistent scoring that he urged Walsh to split up the relatively young nucleus of Miller, the Davises, forward Derrick McKey and center Rik Smits. (All but Miller are in their 20s.) Walsh intends to do nothing of the sort.

"We never had a chance to be the team we'd thought we would be this season," says Walsh. "Smits was never Smits. He was hurt all year [ankle and leg injuries]. Then, finally, when we started to come around, Reggie went down."

Whether or not Miller stays, there will be a changing of the guards, or at least of the guards' rotation. Rookie point guard Travis Best, who was used sparingly in the regular season but showed considerable moxie against Atlanta, looms large in the team's future. Brown has vowed to "hand

the kid the ball" next season—meaning the Pacers will try to move one of their other veteran point guards, Mark Jackson (unlikely, with two years left at \$2.9 million and \$3.2 million) or Haywood Workman, who will draw interest because he plays tough defense and is a bargain at an average salary of \$1.29 million over the next three seasons.

Last week Brown, unwillingly or otherwise, further muddled the picture. He was named a candidate for the Bulls' head coaching job.

Walsh, though, is confident his core of players will be enough to get the team back to the playoffs. He has already asked general manager Norm Sonju to recommend Pacers assistant GM Heard for the Mavericks job (vacant since Dick Motta quit on May 1). Sonju inquired about Brown's suit for the general manager's job.

"I told him I thought Larry was happy where he was, and if he made a move, it would have to include part ownership," says Walsh. "Norm never asked for permission to talk to Larry, and I didn't think much about it until I picked up my paper and saw Larry listed as one of their top candidates."

In a subsequent call to Sonju, Walsh was assured it was all a "misunderstanding," and that Dallas's new ownership, headed by

Ross Perot Jr., had not contacted Brown.

Funny how those "misunderstandings" have dogged Brown for much of his career. He was vacationing in Phoenix when asked by *The Dallas Morning News* about the Mavs job, and instead of immediately dismissing it as a possibility, Brown said he was both "flattered" and "embarrassed." Naturally that fueled speculation that the nomadic Brown (who has held eight coaching jobs, both college and pro, since 1972) was ready to move on.

Sonju, quickly recognizing that Brown's name on the list of coaching prospects could result in a tampering charge, sent out a release last Friday insisting Brown was never a candidate. Sure, and Perot's dad never wanted to be president of the United States.

Meanwhile Brown's public waffling undermined his close friend Walsh, who earlier this season packed him when his players were on the verge of revolt because of Brown's relentless browbeatings. On Monday, Walsh and Brown sat down for what Walsh called a "five talk" about all that had occurred.

Even after 13 seasons in the NBA, Larry Brown still hasn't learned to live by a rather simple motto: Just say no.

Even if Miller (opposite, top) and the Davises (Dale, below, and Antonio, 33) stay put, Indy's title prospects are in doubt.



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Claims on Clemons

Jim Clemons, in his seventh year as a Bulls assistant coach and a perennial candidate for vacant head-coaching positions, is in the thick of yet another run for the championship, and his presence on the Chicago



still holding out hope for Seattle coach George Karl, who would be their top choice. Karl can't talk until the Sonics, who on Sunday completed a sweep of their Western Conference semifinal series with Houston, conclude their postseason.

Milwaukee has also been making discreet inquiries about Ford, who was on new Sixers general manager Brad Greenberg's list of coaching candidates to replace John Lucas (fired on Monday). Vancouver coach Brian Winters, who played eight seasons in Milwaukee, has surfaced as a potential Bucks candidate, but as of late Monday afternoon Grizzlies general manager Stu Jackson said that the Bucks had not called to ask permission to speak with Winters.

In Dallas former Suns coach Paul Westphal met for more than four hours on Saturday with Mavericks officials, complete with a helicopter escort by Perot from his North Dallas offices to his private ranch. One team source said Westphal was "extremely impressive" in his interview. He should be considered the early front-runner—if the Mavericks really have gotten over their fixation on Brown. In the meantime, Brad Davis, Motta's assistant and meeting heir apparent, had an interview on Monday, but it was merely a courtesy.

Dallas could entice the rocky coach Rick Pitino to stop by, however, but that interview would be far more than a courtesy. Pitino has been adamant about his plans to stay in Lexington next season, but that was before sophomore Antoine Walker walked into his office and announced he was going pro. As a result, Pitino's name has also surfaced again in New Jersey.

Around the Rim

Portland point guard Ron Strickland, long at loggerheads with coach P.J. Carlesimo, has said he doubts he'll be back with the Blazers next season. But that will depend on Portland president Bob Whitsitt, who has attached a high price tag to Strickland and won't trade him unless he gets equal value. Also, any team that deals for Strickland should be prepared to offer him an extension on his contract, which has

two years left, at \$2.6 million and \$3 million. Portland will keep forward Dontonio Wingfield, who played for the league minimum last season (\$225,000), but the Blazers are not likely to exercise their option on 36-year-old Buck Williams, whose \$3.4 million salary is considered too steep.

Here's one more reason that the Suns' Charles Barkley, who is once again hinting at retirement, should play next season: He's the assists shy of becoming the fourth player in NBA history to score 20,000 career points, grab 10,000 rebounds and dish out 3,500 assists. The other three? Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Elgin Baylor and Wilt Chamberlain. What's really absurd about Dennis Rodman? It's his demand for \$10 million a season from the Bulls, especially considering that some of his key teammates don't want him back at any price. Hasn't he paid attention to the strained negotiations between the team and coach Phil Jackson? Jackson doesn't want to be the highest-paid or the most powerful coach in the league, but he would like more input in personnel matters (he doesn't even have carte blanche in picking his assistants) and compensation somewhere in the \$7 million-a-year range. Team sources say the Bulls stopped at \$1.5 million.



bench could hurt him as he again tries to land a head job. Clemons has drawn interest from both Charlotte and Dallas, but Bulls general manager Jerry Krause forbids his employees to interview for other jobs while the team is still competing.

In contrast Spurs assistant Dave Cowens was given the full blessing of general manager Gregg Popovich when he asked for permission to meet with Hornets officials last week, though San Antonio was still alive in the playoffs at the time. Next up on Charlotte's list was former Boston coach Chris Ford, who was scheduled to meet with Hornets vice president of basketball operations Bob Bass on May 14. Sources say the Hornets are

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